THE LIVELY EXPERIMENT

September 13, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 5:17-20
Galatians 5:1,13,14

"For freedom Christ has set us free."
-Galatians 5:1a(RSV)

I can remember the occasion as if it were yesterday. It was a pleasant spring morning, made even more agreeable by the fact that our Easter break began at the end of the school day. (This story takes place back in the days when there was such a thing as an Easter break in the public schools. It was also the time when school began, each morning, with ten verses of Scripture, the Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance.)

Miss Moore, the teacher of our fifth grade class, chose what seemed to her a logical portion of the Bible to read to us on the last morning before Easter vacation, the account of the crucifixion of Jesus in the 19th Chapter of the Gospel according to John. Now that is a very powerful narrative. I know now what no one in the classroom had any way of knowing - namely that the Gospel of John was written rather late, perhaps seventy or eighty years after the fact, in a period of sometimes intense conflict between the Christian Church in Jerusalem and the Synagogue. And furthermore that when John uses the term "Jews," he means often, the particular leaders of the nation who were in an unholy alliance with the occupying Romans to keep Palestine under control. John's view of these people is roughly equivalent to a patriotic Frenchmen's view of those who collaborated with the Nazis.

I know now that when John uses the term "Jews" pejoratively, he means those collaborators, not a whole race or nation of people. But I didn't know it then and neither did the boy whose seat was next to mine. His name was Charles Kaminsky. He went to Synagogue on Saturday. On Sunday afternoon when my next door neighbor best friends, Baptists, were incarcerated on the front porch, allowed to do nothing which might suggest fun - actual human pleasure - Charlie was down at the Jewish Center shooting baskets... which accounted for my first serious flirtation with Judaism. My parents had explained: the difference is they just don't believe in Jesus.

I remember that day clearly. Miss Moore read from John 19 - "they cried out crucify him." Pilate said, "Take him yourself and crucify him,

for I find no crime in him." The Jews answered, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die."

I can recall Charlie Kaminsky that day, and how he looked down at his desk as Miss Moore read about the Jews demanding Jesus' death. And, although I didn't know a thing about John Locke and Thomas Jefferson on liberty, I knew that something very unfair and something very un-American was happening.

I learned later what it was. After high school Civics and Constitutional Law in college and a life long love affair with history - which always leaves me with tears in my eyes when I stand in Independence Hall, or walk the cobble stone streets of Old Philadelphia - I learned that the Constitution of the United States of America is based on a concept of a free society in which that sort of thing will not happen, in which Charlie Kaminsky will not have to be a part of an exercise in state-sponsored religion. I learned, over the years, that the Constitution is based on a radical, unique notion of liberty, of human rights - not as an occasional luxury - but as the very essence of the system. I learned that this is one of the only places in the world where Charlie Kamisky's rights come before the right of the state to affirm theological truth. I also learned that it has always been a fragile enterprise, that the people who wrote the Constitution regarded it as an experiment, a bold, brave enterprise moving off in a direction different from the entire flow of human history, thought it might not work and that they might have to revert to a kind of monarchy.

It was an experiment from the start. At his inauguration as the first President elected under this radical new system of government, George Washington said -

"The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are... finally staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."

Fifty years later President Van Buren was still referring to the Federal System as a test... (See Arthur Schlesinger, The Cycles of American History, p. 10) And, of course, it still is... not a week passes without someone suggesting that what the Constitution guarantees ought to be limited, redefined - for our own good, of course.

It was May, 1787 that delegates from the twelve states (Rhode Island did not elect delegates), gathered in Philadelphia to create a new government. Among them were names we know: Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, George Washington, and names only historians know: Gilman and Langdon, Gerry and Ellsworth and Gorham. Thomas Jefferson, the architect of the republic, was in Paris representing the United States. "The fifty-five who would actually take part in the deliberations were men of wide experience." (see William Peters', A More Perfect Union, p. 23 ff). Twenty-one had fought in the Revolutionary War, their average age was forty-three, (older than those who Declared Independence), the youngest was twenty-six and Franklin, at eighty-one, was the oldest. Most were men of means: half had graduated from college, most were church members but the general consensus is that they were men of the enlightenment, rationalists

who believed in a Supreme Being, divine providence, but were hardly zealous in their orthodoxy. "They could take their religion or leave it alone," says one historian. (Ibid, p. 24)

James Madison had prepared for the convention by intense study, reading anything he could get his hands on about republican form of government. Jefferson sent him books and pamphlets from Paris. He became a dominant figure at the convention and took copious notes, an hour by hour record - an invaluable resource for historians. George Washington was elected to preside. The deliberations were in secret. And in the middle of what seemed an irresolvable conflict, Franklin suggested daily prayer, but the convention decided against it because they couldn't afford to pay a chaplain and the matter was dropped.

They considered a limited monarchy but decided on a President and a two-house Legislature and an independent Judiciary. Three branches - in tension. They decided how to elect representatives, how to finance the operation and how the new Federal System would relate to the states. They did not deal with slavery, although many, perhaps a majority, would have preferred to end it on the spot. They did not address individual rights which disappointed Jefferson; five states ratified a Bill of Rights anyway and four years later ten amendments were added. They concluded their work in September. On September 17, after a magnificent address authored by Franklin, who was too sick to deliver it himself, the convention unanimously approved the Constitution. Thirty-eight delegates signed it and at four o'clock they adjourned and walked several blocks to the City Tavern for a farewell dinner.

It is, I submit, the 17th day of September, 1787, the most important day in our history. It will not edge out the Fourth of July. It is not as colorful, romantic and heroic. Martin Marty quipped last summer, that there would probably be no tall ships, fireworks or parades - that it is difficult to toast a piece of parchment. But it is the occasion of the creation of this republic. There are lots of revolutions to celebrate. But there is only one day like this. Those fifty-five men knew it. They knew, I believe, that they had done something unique in all of history. And its 200th Anniversary this week is an occasion if not for shouting and singing, at least for thoughtful reflection and profound gratitude.

The experiment is still being challenged. The tensions within that Constitutional Convention are still very much present in our common life. There is almost daily debate somewhere in our system about the Constitution. And much of the debate and a good portion of the original experiment had to do with religion.

Article VI reads: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

And the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

That is new. In all of history - that is a radical notion. No established religion and no prohibitions about its expression. The rights of the individual. No one in history had ever tried to build a nation on that. In fact, the full weight of human history is on the opposite side of that equation. Until 1787 the human assumption in the West, particularly, was that religious uniformity, an established church, a spiritual commonality, is one of the things that makes a nation. The assumption was that religious uniformity is so essential to the existence of the state, that non-conformists are actually guilty of sedition, treason.

The Inquisition thought it was acting in the best interests of the people. John Calvin presided over the execution of fifty-eight people in Geneva - for the good of the city. Outside Moffatt, Scotland where we lived for a summer, there is a monument to John Hunter, who was shot fleeing from British troops. Hunter was a "Covenanter." The Scottish and English crowns had become one - and now in the 17th Century, the crown was trying to force the church of Scotland to become Anglican... for the good of the realm. The Covenantors were Scots who insisted that the church remain Presbyterian. And they were ready to die for that. John Hunter was shot - fleeing English troops. He had been caught at a Presbyterian Kirk service - an act of treason against the crown. Across the street from the manse is the Black Bull Inn where Claverhouse, the British Commander stayed - while raiding the Kirk worship services held out in the hills and ravines. When settlers came to this country they thought like that. Virginia established the Anglican Church. New Amsterdam established the Reformed Church. The Puritans made Congregationalism the official and only faith of the Bay Colony. Each persecuted non-conformists. Francis Mackemie, a Presbyterian minister, was arrested in New York and jailed. Quakers were barred in Massachusetts. Peter Stuyvesant kept Jews out of New York as well.

It was Jefferson's idea - religious freedom. He fashioned the concept in Virginia. It is there in the Constitution. When they created a government, they did not create a church to go with it. They did not invoke the name of God at all. They said, "We the people..." and in case anyone misunderstood, the very First Amendment spelled it out.

What makes a nation a nation here is not religious conformity but a brand new notion - religious freedom. What makes this a nation is liberty: not people thinking the same thoughts, but people free to think whatever they think: to believe in Jesus or Mohammed or nothing: to read what they want to read, not what the government thinks is helpful, moral and edifying: to get together and talk about whatever is on their minds, even to assemble to complain about the government. That is a rare and beautiful thing. People who understand it and agree with it get nervous when someone suggests that a board of review knows what movies we should see, or books we should read. We abhor the philosophic-political conclusion of Marxists and Fascists - that the party knows what truth is - and therefore what can be read, listened to or talked about openly. And we do become uncomfortable when a government, for its internal security, or the progress of its revolution, shuts down the newspapers. And we are offended when clergy are jailed, silenced or banished.

It is still a lively experiment. The issue comes at us in the concern that this nation has lost its moral fiber, that secular humanists

are taking over, that we are becoming a godless culture and that what we need is government supported praying in schools, and tax supported nativity scenes in City Hall or at least an official nod in the direction of something called the Judeo-Christian tradition. To which Martin Marty asked recently, which Judeo-Christian tradition do we have in mind? After all, he pointed out, four prominent Baptists would have very different notions of what the tradition is. If you don't believe it ask the four of these: Jesse Jackson, Jesse Helms, Jerry Falwell and Harvey Cox who writes about the other three from his desk at Harvard.

In the midst of all the heat and hand wringing this issue generates it is time for someone to say what the Constitution itself says: namely that a "Christian America" is a contradiction in terms. There is room for everyone in Mr. Jefferson's experiment.

In the place of privilege, we received freedom. In the place of state sponsorship - a Department of religious affairs in Washington (which, by the way, Russia has) - we received the right to be responsible for ourselves. In the place of establishment, the Constituion forced the church in America to redefine itself and to be relevant and interesting or to disappear. In the place of tax support we had to learn how to be responsible stewards. And it has been the best thing that ever happened to us.

There is, in fact, a very vigorous institutional church in this land. It is far more vigorous and creative and lively than the churches which are established and supported and sponsored by governments.

There is a wall of separation between church and state and the intent of the wall is to keep the state out of the church's business for the benefit of each. It is not to keep religion and politics separate. In fact, by freeing the church from state support the Constitution invites the church to relate to the state, to advise, complain, pray for, protest against the state in radical freedom.

President Kennedy understood that. In the midst of nuclear test ban negotiations with the Russians and Kennedy's decision to resume testing, a delegation from the World Council of Churches came and asked how they could be helpful. "Perhaps you shouldn't be" he answered. He understood that to be the church, they ought not simply to be applauding, blessing and baptizing everything the state does, but on occasion objecting to what he felt he had to do: that the function of the church in this society is, on occasion, to remind the government of a higher authority and a high moral standard than political necessity.

Why this homily on political liberty? Because the system is ours and this week all of us who are blessed by it - ought to celebrate it and express gratitude for it. Because the system reflects values that are ours, values which by frequently originated in the Biblical tradition.

Freedom for instance. God, we believe is very interested in it. God is a liberator from the beginning. God hears the cries of a captive, oppressed people and goes to work to set them free. And that, we believe, is the way God can be counted on to act.

Where people want to be free - the Spirit of the Lord is at work. In South Africa, in Korea, in Central America, in Poland, in East Germany, in Chile, in Chicago, God is the outside agitator, pressing for the end to oppression, planting dreams of liberty in the hearts and minds of people, the end to everything that imprisons and limits the humanity of people.

And it is personal. God is interested in your freedom - from whatever imprisons and limits you... In fact, freedom - glorious, personal freedom - is a synonym for the salvation Jesus Christ gives to us.

At Nazarath, early in his ministry, Jesus defined his vocation as "Good News" to the poor... release to the captives... liberty to the oppressed.

I learned that late... that salvation is not just a good warm feeling in the soul - but freedom... what Paul called "the glorious freedom of the children of God" ... and that what it feels like to be a Christian is to be released from prison.

What God has done for us is provide for our freedom.

If your prison is guilt - in Jesus Christ, you may be forgiven and experience - your freedom...

If your prison - a painfully low estimate of your worth - God frees you from that by calling you his child.

If your prison is duplicity, dishonesty - God frees you by knowing you...

If your prison is depression, despair - God frees you by saying "I love you."

If your prison is fear - about death and what will happen when you die - in Jesus Christ God sets you free of that.

So in Christ - we are free - to live without fear, without burden of guilt, free to walk into our future with joy and courage and hope. "For freedom Christ has set you free," Paul wrote to the early church in Galatia.

But that does not mean self-indulgence, the moral anarchy which insists on "doing its own thing." That, Paul understood, is simply a new kind of slavery - slavery to self...

The final enemy of freedom, personal and also political, is selfishness. Where there is no commitment to the public welfare, the good of the whole, individual personal freedom deteriorates in noisy, moral anarchy, each clamoring for rights with no obligations, no responsibilities. And personally, when there is no commitment to a greater good than making myself feel good, freedom leaves the bitter taste of selfishness, or sin, in our mouths.

Christians have always known that it is in commitment to Jesus Christ, in putting ourselves in his service, that we are truly free.

One of my favorite poems is by Charles Peguy. I think it is hauntingly beautiful. It is called "Freedom."

"When you have once known what it is to be loved freely,
submission no longer has any taste.
All the prostrations in the world
are not worth the beautiful upright
attitude of a free man as he kneels.
All the submissions, all the dejection in this world
are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation
From a love that is free."
[Freedom, Charles Peguy]

The United States of America was an experiment. It still is - a very lively experiment. It is based on the notion that people should be free. It is related to the faith that God creates us to be free, wants us free, works with us for our freedom, strengthens us to be free.

I didn't realize it until someone pointed it out to me that the first verse of our "National Anthem ends with a question... "Does that star-spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free and home of the brave?"

A good question for this week, in September, 1987.

A good question for those of us who gather in trust and praise of one about whom it is said -

"For freedom Christ has set us free."

O God, you are author of liberty and to thee we do sing. We thank you for our freedom. We thank you for our system of government, our Constitution and for those who created it. We thank you for your spirit, the spirit of freedom which rested gently on them and which enlivens people who love freedom in every age. O God, bless our nation. May we be worthy in our day of this legacy. And may we pass on to those who follow us this lively experiment, through Jesus Christ in whom we find perfect freedom. Amen.